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PERHAPS the press pays a bit more attention to these things than the rest of you, but you will forgive us for observing that a hallmark of any administration is the way it defines the secrets it really means to keep, the measures it takes to keep those secrets secret, and the further measures it takes when it discovers, as it invariably does, that its precautions have been at least selectively breached. Certainly nothing better characterized, or more hurt, the Nixon administration than its approach to the various sorts of secrets it generated. It hardly seems stretching things to suggest that in 1976 Jimmy Carter ran principally on—against—Richard Nixon's record on secrets. So it is entirely understandable that people should be curious to see how Jimmy Carter handles secrets on his own.

What does the Carter record show so far? There have been no serious allegations that Mr. Carter has, for either personal or political gain, abused the label of national security and the procedures of secret-keeping available to a president in order to cover up the kind of abuses of power that, when uncovered, finished President Nixon. In that important respect, his claim to "open" government is respectable. At the same time, Mr. Carter has been sorely vexed by foreign-policy leaks. As indicated yesterday by reporter Scott Armstrong, the list is short on bombshells but medium-to-long on sensitive nuts-and-bolts items—for instance, what kind of arms should be sold to Morocco?—that no government would wish to discuss publicly, least of all while the question was still undecided. As always, these leaks have come, by the administration's reckoning, from disgruntled insiders.

To plug leaks, there have evidently been no plumbers, no wiretaps and, on another level, there has been little significant (and ultimately self-defeating) narrowing of the circle of those brought into the policy-making process. But there have been a number of FBI investigations; predictably, they appear to have gotten nowhere. And Mr. Carter has gotten mad enough to threaten to fire State Department officials from whose "area" the leak came—though his precise words in this matter are uncertain. Frankly, we have no complaint about all this: if, as we believe, it's up to the press to dig out secrets, it's up to the government to keep them. Presidents tend to see a necessity, where journalists often see at best a mere convenience, in maintaining confidentiality in internal decision-making and in certain dealings with foreign governments. That is where the war is fought and, we would say, Jimmy Carter has fought fair.

Something else cries out to be said, however, about the report that, with respect to the Morocco story last October, "I didn't leak it" affidavits were either solicited from his top national security aides by Mr. Carter or volunteered by them. There may be no way for an administration to chase leaks without bruising the sensibilities of people down in the ranks, as the president has done. But to nourish an atmosphere in which the confidence of one's elite advisers is somehow called into question? Only a few months earlier, in his "malaise" period, Mr. Carter had brought about a set of circumstances in which his whole Cabinet was allowed or encouraged to say it would resign. There's a pattern here. It is a strange way to earn the full trust and loyalty of one's closest advisers.